



# Re.Climate™

COMMUNICATING FOR CHANGE

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OTTAWA, CANADA: A woman is taken through the crowd by stretcher on July 1, 2011 in downtown Ottawa, Ontario. Several people had succumbed to the heat while waiting to see William and Kate.

# HEAT WAVES AND “UN-NATURAL DISASTERS”

A Tip Sheet for Communicators

This tip sheet provides guidelines for climate communicators to engage Canadians about the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events—such as heat waves—due to climate change. This guide's framing, narrative, image, and strategic recommendations are based on peer-reviewed literature, Re.Climate's focus groups, and research by EcoAnalytics, Climate Visuals, and Potential Energy.

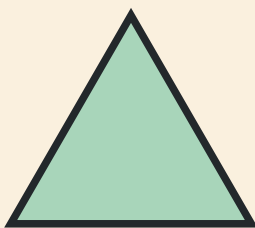


## CHOICE

*These heat waves will keep getting worse until we stop burning fossil fuels.*

## CHALLENGE

*These more intense heat waves are not natural—this is climate change endangering our lives and the people and places we love.”*



## OPPORTUNITY

*Let’s pull together—join with millions of Canadians worried about climate change who want our governments to hold big polluters accountable.*

**Bring it back to basics:** Talk about causes and impacts, then link to solutions. Use simple language. Hit repeat.

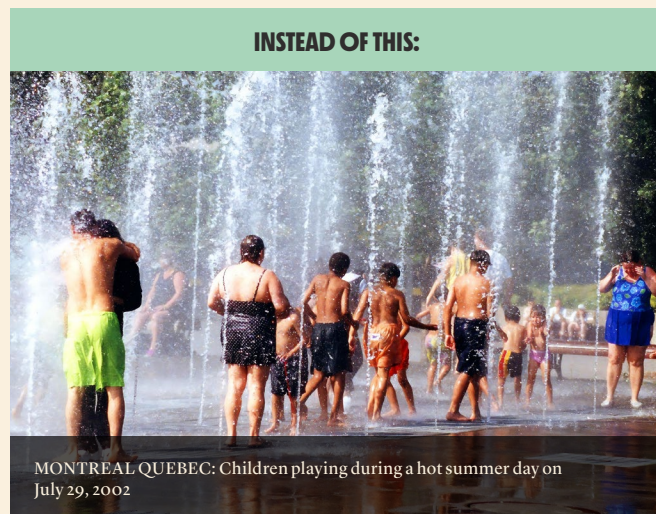
| INSTEAD OF...               | SAY..  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| “Extreme weather”           | “Unnatural heat waves,” “These extreme heat waves are not natural.” <sup>1</sup>   |
| “Climate change”            | “These unnatural disasters are fuelled by burning fossil fuels like oil, gas, and coal.”   |
| “Reducing emissions”        | “Climate change will keep getting worse and worse until we eliminate fossil fuel pollution from burning oil, gas and coal.”                      |
| “Weather”                   | “Heat waves harm our most vulnerable: seniors, young children, and people with pre-existing health conditions.”<br>Heat waves kill wildlife too. |
| “The future”                | “Climate change is hurting us right now. Hurting the people and places we love.”   |
| “Addressing climate change” | “We need regulations that hold corporations accountable for the fossil fuel pollution they generate. Hold polluters accountable.”                |
| “We need action”            | “Join with millions of Canadians who want our governments to hold big polluters accountable.”  |

<sup>1</sup> “Unnatural” is 2X as effective at focusing minds on fossil fuels than calling it “extreme weather” (Potential Energy, 2024)

# Images

## Images convey risk to health and safety, if done right

- **Show the human side of impacts like heat waves., especially at scale, ideally with faces visible:** hospitals, cooling centres, paramedics, doctors, and nurses providing care to heat-affected people.
- **Avoid:** “Fun in the sun” (water parks, ice cream, people at the beach) when depicting heat.
- Images of heat need to convey “medical emergency.”



# Messengers

## Amplify scientists, doctors, and affected people

Important: People trust scientists—but they’re thinking about frontline “scientists” like doctors, paramedics, and nurses (not necessarily Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change scientists).

# Important Framing

## Acknowledge that:

- Climate change is a big global problem: Canada’s actions alone won’t stop heat waves. However, every tonne of fossil fuel pollution we reduce matters and Canada is a big source of it. (See Useful Facts, below)
- Advanced economies, like Canada, need to regulate polluters and innovate. We need to show the way and keep up with record-setting investments in renewable energy in countries like China and the United States. The world needs to act together.

## Be careful to:

- Be sensitive to people directly affected by an extreme weather event but remember this is the key moment for people engaging through the media to get explanations.
- Use human-centred stories. Facts and science are important when people are information-seeking but human stories move people.

# Useful Facts:

- **Attribution science** means we can now say with confidence that “**Every heatwave in the world is now stronger and more likely to happen** because of human-caused climate change.” Source: Ben Clarke and Friederike Otto, [World Weather Attribution, 2023](#).
- **Climate change is making heat waves much worse. They will keep getting worse, until we stop burning fossil fuels.**
  - Establish the mental model that climate change keeps worsening until we eliminate fossil fuel pollution (net-zero).
- **Canada is not alone.** The whole world needs to act and Canada is a player.
  - Canada has a small population but is one of the world’s top 10 climate polluters.
  - Canada’s emissions have not dropped like other G7 countries. Even the U.S. has cut back.
  - Canada is second in the world for per-capita emissions, and number one for most cumulative emissions (the total emissions since the industrial revolution). Source: [Government of Canada, 2023](#).
- **The climate crisis is a fossil fuel pollution crisis.**
  - **91 per cent** of the world’s carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) pollution comes from burning fossil fuels. Source: [CarbonBrief, 2022](#).
- **“Join with millions of Canadians”**
  - Validate concern and counter the feeling of isolation.
  - Use “millions” or “over 25 million” instead of a percentage to reinforce the social norm for action. (Over 25 million = 63 per cent of Canadians who think climate change is a crisis requiring immediate action.) Source: [Angus Reid Institute, 2023](#).
- **Progress:** The world is making progress on climate solutions, and so is Canada. Join millions of Canadians to move farther, faster ([World Energy Investments: International Energy Agency, 2024](#)).
- **Animals, nature, and people: “Heat waves kill everything.”**
  - Don’t be shy about communicating impacts on animals and nature. These are core elements of Canadian identity, across ideology. An [Abacus 2024](#) poll reports 70 per cent of Canadians say the country’s natural beauty and environment is the source of their national pride.
  - Participants in 2024 Re.Climate focus groups expressed great concern about animals and nature when exposed to extreme event imagery (e.g., wildfires).
- **Address disinformation:**
  - In anticipation of an extreme weather event, inoculate (pre-bunk) by sharing factual information.
  - Use a “[truth sandwich](#)” to debunk disinformation instead of repeating it: Lead with the truth—Then, briefly describe the disinformation. Seed doubt about its source and fact-check—Then repeat the truth.

# Experiment with these ideas and let us know how they work out for you:

- How does naming specific, local/regional events as “unnatural disasters” influence your messaging impact?
- Do images in a collage work better to depict scale and individual human impact?
- Is there a difference in audience response to the terms “fossil fuel pollution” over “carbon pollution”?

## Resources

[The impacts of extreme heat events](#), Statistics Canada, 2024.

[Communicating the links between climate change and heat waves with the Climate Shift Index](#), Thomas-Walters, L. et al, 2024. American Meteorological Society.

[What do Canadians Really Think About Climate Change](#), Re.Climate, 2024.

[Heat Pumps Save Lives](#), 350.org, 2024.

[How climate change worsens heatwaves, droughts, wildfires and floods](#), BBC, 2024.

[Unnatural Disasters Resource Hub](#), Potential Energy Coalition, 2024.

[Unnatural Disasters tip sheet](#), Potential Energy Coalition, 2024.

[Talk Like a Human](#), Potential Energy Coalition, 2024.

[Indigenous Perspectives: Unnatural Disasters](#). Canadian Climate Institute, 2021.

[Climate Visuals Image Gallery](#), Climate Outreach.

[Is Climate Change to Blame?](#) (Video explaining attribution science), Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 2024.

[Environment Canada Can Now Rapidly Link High-Heat Weather Events to Climate Change](#), CBC News, Jun 16, 2024.

[World Energy Investments](#), International Energy Agency, 2024.